Arts Education in Public Schools: The Voices of the Children

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Abstract

This research paper is a descriptive, qualitative enquiry to investigate learners' views and experiences in arts education in South African public schools. The objective of the research was to identify the advantageous and disadvantageous experiences of learners in arts education in order to predict the needs and challenges of arts education in public schools. The phenomenological study was based on grounded theory and used student group discussions as a sole data collection tool. The research results show that arts education in public schools is largely inadequate as a result of teachers' inaptitude in certain art skills. There is a lack of physical resources to make arts education more effective. Generally there is lack of respect for the arts among non-arts students and teachers.

Key words: South Africa, Arts and Culture, Art Education, Marginalization,

1. Introduction

Many educators and educational planners seldom, if ever, consider the viewpoint of learners when they plan for educational experiences. The South African Constitution, section 28 (2) provides that 'A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child.' Many people may define 'best interests' as that which is good for the child, independent of the child's feelings and opinions, but 'best interests' can mean that which the child considers important and best for himself or herself. To give effect to section 28 (3) of the Constitution, the Children's Act, section 12 (10) provides that "Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration." While legally a child is anybody under the age of 18, the law accepts the testimony of any child mentally capable and intellectually mature as binding and therefore worthy of consideration. In school, a child of the intermediary phase (grades 4-6) can distinguish between likes and dislikes, while a child in the senior phase of education (grades 7-9), can certainly be deemed intellectually mature enough to distinguish between negative and positive experiences, or alternatively, advantageous and disadvantageous experiences. According to Jean Piaget's intellectual stages of development, children between the ages of 11-14 progress to the formal operational stage of abstract reasoning (Piaget, 1985). That means that children from the start of their teenage years may already be capable of adult intellectual functions and therefore old enough to distinguish between vices and virtues, another reason why many churches confirm children during this period of their life. It would therefore be reasonable to consider the opinions of children, especially from the

senior phase of education, concerning the type of educational experiences they deem beneficial from their perception and level of experience.

Many authors have over the years documented that arts education in schools occurs infrequently, are of a substandard value and seldom meet the needs of the curriculum (Russell-Bowie, 1993; Anderson, 2003; Pascoe et al., 2005; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008; Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009). This is often the result of generalist teachers who have had little experience with art forms. Power & Klopper (2011) found that pre-service and in-service teacher education does not provide adequate preparation or support for generalist teachers to meet the expectations of the arts education curriculum. Garvis (2010) found that arts educators are often denied opportunities to access in-service training, thereby presenting an obstacle to effectively teaching the arts. While it is not expected that a generalist teacher should know all areas of arts education, they should at least be intimately familiar with one art form.

The fact that public schools often task generalist teachers, who have very little experience in art forms, with the teaching of the arts, shows that arts education is widely considered insignificant and merely as entertainment. Contrary to this perception, an American research report, based on statistical data, shows that the arts play an important role in a country's cultural vitality and economic prosperity (Gioia, 2008). The report found that designers are the largest group of artists and writers the fastest growing artistic profession, the two groups also falling under the highest education levels. Actors, musicians and dancers together form the second largest group of artists in society. Artists form a significantly large component of a society. A good basic arts education in school is therefore important for its effective contribution to the cultural and economic vivacity of a country.

While in the past, potential artists learned practical artistic skills under an apprenticeship with a master artist, today's arts education is largely cognitive in character and abstract in nature (Sullivan, 1996, Bach Hanson, 2001; Efland, 2002). One aspect of such learning is the use of media technologies which surprisingly have a beneficial influence on the arts. Lyengar (2009) found that electronic media is a gateway to greater arts participation. His research shows that people who engage with the arts through media technologies are often the ones who attend live performances and arts exhibits. In addition, older people, rural communities and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience the arts through the media than through live performances. Hesham and Wing (2004) contend that web-based learning is more effective in reaching all types of students and reducing differences in the academic performance among different student learning styles.

The cognitive nature of arts education, the infrequent and substandard instruction and the inadequate learning environment, all have a detrimental effect on the learners' appreciation and concept of the value of arts in society. In addition, arts teachers often improvise as a result of the limits imposed by the lack of access to adequate teaching materials and media. These unsatisfactory conditions do not go unnoticed by learners and have a long-term, subconscious effect on them. Rabkin and Hedberg (2011) found that the decline in arts education in the schools directly impact on the deterioration of the arts industry, resulting in poor concert and arts exhibition attendance and a decline in jobs in the arts and music industry.

Arts education, if teaching conditions are satisfactory, teaches learners to value, appreciate and respect their cultural heritage and art expressions. Learners are not inanimate objects or empty buckets that have to be filled with whatever happens to be available to them. They are intelligent, rational beings, who have feelings and minds to make their own conclusions and assumptions based on their experiences. It is therefore

important that their voices be heard. This research paper is descriptive in nature and used qualitative learner group discussions as a sole research tool to collect data pertaining to learners' views and experiences in arts education in schools. The objective of the research was to identify the good and bad experiences of learners' arts educational experiences so as to ascertain the shortcomings and challenges of arts education in public schools.

2. Research Methodology

The research employed qualitative methodology, using grounded theory to develop emergent categories based on data derived from learner discussion groups. It was guided by the research question 'What are the challenges facing arts education in public schools based on the experiences of learners?' The study was limited to grades 7-9 in 20 former Model C schools selected in the KwaZulu-Natal area of South Africa. A random convenience sample that focused on the vibrancy of their Creative Arts programme, supportive administration and teacher interest, was used.

The participants were Zulu and English mother-tongue speakers, comprising of altogether 1052 learners. Letters for permission and informed consent forms to conduct the research were given to and received from the provincial Department of Education, school principals, Creative Arts teachers, the learners and their parents. Learners were given a sample of semi-structured, open-ended questions in advance to give them an idea of what to expect during discussions, in order to consider their participation.

Group discussions with learners were conducted during their Creative Arts classes, producing data of 20 periods, each 40 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded with a Dictaphone, supplemented with note-taking. The research was conducted over a period of one and half months, visiting 3-4 schools per week.

3. Data Presentation

Categories developing from the learner discussion groups include Shortcomings in Arts Instruction, Lack of an Effective Learning Environment and Inadequate Provision for Learners' Interests.

Shortcomings in Arts Instruction

Asked whether they learn more effectively when art teachers use certain kinds of teaching methods to facilitate arts experiences, students attested to the fact that teachers used group work a lot. The learners who seemed slow liked group work, while those who seemed fast learners preferred to work on their own. Of the 1052 learners who participated in the research study, 551 (52%) said they learn faster when working in groups ranging from no more than 2-4, while 501 (48%) said they preferred to work alone. Common reasons given among learners for preferring group work include that they could share ideas, teach and help each other, give each other advice and suggestions, and helped them to communicate and team with classmates and friends. Learner who complained about group work said that some group members were slow and kept them behind, some laughed at them, some were lazy and slow and did not contribute, they talked too much and distracted their attention from the task at hand, and they often conflicted and were unable to agree on things, while some were not serious and wasted their time.

All learners (100%) felt that teachers focused too much on theoretical work and not enough on practical work. They felt that theoretical work was too abstract and should be integrated with practical work and not be taught separately.

When probed about the type of practical experiences their parents would not approve of, the responses were as follows: 238 (24%) said movies with an 'S' (sex) rating or any pornographic content, 182 (17%) said Hip Hop and Rap music because of the strong words in the lyrics, 171 (16%) said music videos in which singers drink alcohol, smoke or use drugs, 153 (15%) said their parents would disapprove dancing at disco clubs, 128 (12%) said movies which have lots of violence, 112 (11%) learners said that their parents prohibited them from visiting clubs and taverns, 42 (4%) said performing or seeing exotic dancing, 6 (1%) said rock music because it is noisy.

Lack of an Effective Learning Environment

The lack of effective environment includes suitable venues as well as a learning atmosphere conducive to effective learning. Data showed that of the 1052 learners, 320 (30%) were concerned about a separate venue for the learning of the performing arts, including music, dance and drama. Another 232 (22%) mentioned the additional lack of a school hall or concert hall where school plays and concerts or art exhibitions could be publicly offered. While the differences in percentages shows the number of learners who voiced their concerns about two different types of venues, it does not indicate that the one carry more weight than the other. In schools where a concern was raised, it merely showed that learners reminded each other about problems they experienced, the others tacitly agreeing. In all the schools visited, only three schools had access to venues away from other classes and used their school halls for public performances

Other concerns include 66 (6%) of learners complaining about the lack of instrumental ensembles that can be used to perform at school functions or in exchange programmes with other schools, 52 (5%) of learners mentioning the lack of respect from principals and non-arts teachers for Arts and Culture, and 14 (1%) mentioning that there were not enough African dances taught under Dancing.

Learners also felt that their interest and talents were ignored, 24 (2%) mentioning that their interest in fashion designing were not addressed. Another 23 (2%) mentioned that there was not enough time for Arts and Culture classes to devote to skills development, while another 25 (2%) felt that arts exhibitions and art competitions could help encourage them to develop their artistic skills. Learners were keen on real-life experiences and public exposure, with another 27 (3%) complaining that arts teachers did not give them enough outlets for performing publicly in musical, plays and concerts. Another 35 (4%) of learners requested that drama classes be more skills specific and instructional, while 32 (3%) of learners suggested that professional actors and other artists be invited to make presentations to help them acquire such skills

Inadequate Provision for Learners' Interests

Expressing their love for practical engagement in arts education, learners came up with their own areas of interest - areas that they felt teachers did not provide opportunity for proper acquisition of artistic skills. Of the 1052 learners, 266 (25%) were interested in developing their acting ability, wanting more school plays to be staged to act in; 182 (17%) felt that they needed piano tuition or tuition in other western orchestral instruments; 141 (13%) were interested in specific dancing techniques, complaining that teachers expected

them to imagine and invent their own choreographies, while 128 (12%) wanted clear guidance on poetry writing and reading. Other skills not taught include 82 (8%) who felt that guidance on how to do shading in painting was lacking, 69 (7%) mentioned that the playing of drums and other African instruments needed more attention. Another 58 (6%) of learners expressed interest in acquiring skills in pencil drawing, 51 (5%) in writing plays, 42 (4%) were interested in vocal technique to improve their singing, while 33 (3%) showed interest in photography.

In an effort to determine whether learners continued their supposed love for arts engagement after school hours, they were asked if they received private tuition in any musical instrument or other art form. However, only 6 (1%) of the 1052 admitted to receiving piano lessons, others considering their singing in a church or school choir, playing in a sports team and their membership with poetry or drama societies as some form of arts training.

Learners also revealed who inspired then the most when it came to arts creativity. They confirmed that arts educators were less authoritative and autocratic than other educators. An overwhelming majority of 797 (76%) learners said it was the teacher's enthusiasm and passion for the arts that inspired and motivated them, while 203 (19%) said it was their celebrity role models such as singers, movie or television actors/actresses, poets, dancers, photographers and artists; and 52 (5%) said that their parents motivated them.

Learners expressed what they perceived as more effective methods of instruction, but which they claim their teachers seldom provided. A majority of 882 (84%) learners said that educational DVDs would help them to make the learning experience more vivid and memorable in that they would be able to hear and see what is happening and it would demonstrate how to do carry out instructions, while the remaining minority of 170 (16%) said that DVDs would take the focus away from the learning objective and instead serve as entertainment. All 1052 (100%) of learners felt that fieldtrips or excursions gave them practical examples to learn from, exposed them to new experiences, excited them and made them remember everything they saw, and they got first-hand knowledge and information from the professionals in the field who hosted them.

When asked what arts or cultural activities they usually participate in after school hours, learners also admitted what arts or cultural events they would most likely attend with their parents or friends: 360 (34%) attend church, 236 (23%) go to the cinema, 226 (22%) attend sports matches, 89 (8%) attend school entertainment, 51 (5%) attend Gospel shows, 28 (3%) attend poetry readings, 16 (2%) attend fashion shows, 14 (1%) attend theatre shows, 12 (1%) attend art exhibitions, 12 (1%) attend photography exhibitions.

Despite the appearance that the majority of learners came from less favourable economic backgrounds, a majority of 987 (94%) participants admitted to having computers at home. The remaining 65 (6%) learners had access to computers through friends. All learners felt that computers were useful for research on arts and culture as well as searching for educational institutions to pursue further studies; educational videos; typing assignments, plays and poetry; using music software that can help them to write songs and other musical compositions, cut soundtracks or make their own recordings; software on graphic designing that can help them to create their own pictures; software that teach them how to play piano, using a keyboard connected to the computer; software on architectural designs; and software to create their own animated movies.

4. Data Analyses

The data has been analyzed to determine the advantageous and disadvantageous arts educational experiences of learners in terms of the three emergent categories: Shortcoming in arts instruction, Lack of effective learning environment, and Inadequate provision for learner's talents and interests.

Learners identified some of the arts teachers' methods of instruction and the inadequate learning environment as negative experiences in arts education. Feeling strongly about group work, also known as the Project Method, learners were more or less divided on this method of teaching, with a substantial portion of learners (48%) complaining about its frequent use in both written assignments and practical work. Group work is one of the child-centred teachings methods that became popular with outcomes-based education. It fosters a spirit of co-operation and unity among individuals. The results show that it is mainly the majority weak learners who prefer group work since they feel they may learn better from their peers. The fast learner were disgruntled and unhappy, arguing that it instead wasted a lot of time spent on disagreement and frivolity instead of getting work done. This suggests that group work is only partially successful, in that only slow learners seem to benefit, while fast learner instead become frustrated by their lack of sufficient progress and lack of challenge to develop their own creativity. This implies a balance between the use of group work and other methods of instruction that allow for individual development, in order to cater for all streams of intellectual capacity in classrooms.

In addition, all learners felt that teachers were too theoretical and did not provide for enough practical experiences in arts. Feeling that arts teachers resorted to abstract explanations and required them to use their imagination, learners complained that they were not shown real-life examples or given constructive, practical guidance on how to create art forms, be it how to sing, how to draw, how to dance or how to act. The results show that learners longed for guidance in specific techniques that would develop their skills and talents, claiming they were left to their own devices.

Most of the schools visited employed more than one teacher for Arts and Culture, each teacher specializing in a particular area of the arts. This suggests that time in terms of period allocation to the arts, does not usually allow for detailed specifics of each of the four art forms (music, visual arts, dance and drama), only for general education. Hence the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2011) gives schools the option to only do two art forms in the senior phase (grades 7-9) in preparation for the Further Education and Training (FET) phase of specialized education (Grades 10-12). At the time of the research (Oct-Nov 2011), the new curriculum had not yet been implemented and teachers were not yet familiar with its content.

However, the research results show that art teachers generally teach from a theoretical perspective and as a result learners battle to link theory with practice. Learners felt that teachers should integrate theoretical knowledge with practical work, teaching theoretical concepts during practical work and not separately.

Learners identified both physical and human resources as part of the lack of an adequate arts learning environment. The major concern mentioned among many learners was the lack of a suitable venue for arts experiences in addition to a concert or school hall for the performing arts. Other concerns involved the lack of enough musical instruments and fine arts equipment to make skills acquisition possible. The fact that only a certain percentage of learners raised these concerns is not an indication that only some learners felt

concerned about these physical inadequacies, but rather that only that number of learners brought it up, since the other learners seemed to tacitly support the sentiments expressed.

The lack of human resources pertained to areas of interests in visual arts such as fashion designing, architecture and photography. While it is practically impossible to employ so many teachers in each visual art form, it is possible to invite professionals to the schools for one or two periods to familiarize learners with their art form. The results reveal that there is a lack of community involvement of professional artists, perhaps because they have not been approached to get involved in schools and community centres.

The results further show that learners may learn more effectively if experiential methods of instruction are used to facilitate learning. All learners expressed their enthusiasm for fieldtrips and an overwhelming majority verbalized their preference for electronic media such as DVDs, software on artists, artworks and techniques in art forms, as well as the internet, as ideal ways of facilitating their education in the arts. Despite their compatibility and preference for contemporary, modern technologies and ways of learning, the results shows that teachers did not provide for these experiences, even though some schools had computers. This suggests that teachers are the ones who lack behind in updated knowledge and skills in the use of contemporary technologies and arts software. Teachers, who lack computer skills, need in-service training to familiarize themselves with updated computer software on art forms and education.

5. Conclusion

As recipients of the education process, learners had distinctive opinions about how and what they wanted to be taught in arts education. While arts educators and planners seldom consider the voices and opinions of learners as individuals in their own right, whether we like it or not, learners voice their opinions about all the experiences they receive, good or bad, and use them as a yardstick to measure future choices.

The research results shows that arts education is largely inadequate in schools and that learners are not satisfied with the arts experiences they receive. This inadequacy stems from teachers' inaptitude in art skills specific methods of instruction as well as the use of computer software as a supplementary or alternative form of instruction. The lack of a suitable venue apart from general classrooms and the general lack of respect for the arts as a viable area of learning are realities with which many schools still have to deal. Many learners complained that some principals and non-arts teachers 'stole' Arts and Culture periods for their subjects as well as complained that arts made a lot of noise and disrupted their classes. This makes the request for a venue away from other classes an important necessity.

While education policy and curricula may change to effect changes in arts education, this in itself does not achieve the desired educational outcomes in learners. What happens in the field and what appears on paper are two different aspects. In South Africa, for example, the curriculum changed from Curriculum 2005 (C2005) to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and currently the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), in an attempt to address the changing needs and practical realities of the educational experience in South African schools. However, whether the new changes are more desirable and welcoming, this study shows that there are still many challenges that need to be overcome before arts education can be successfully implemented in schools. And who knows better than the learners themselves, who are recipients of the educational process. These challenges include the following **(Slide 8, last slide):**

- In-service training to familiarize and help arts teachers to implement the considerable changes brought into arts education in the new CAPS curriculum;
- Updated knowledge with the use of contemporary software and computer technology in arts education;
- The use of skills-specific methods of instruction in arts education, integrating theory with practice;
- The building of a large venue situated away from other classes where the performing arts can be taught without disrupting other classes.

Until these challenges are met, learners may subconsciously perpetuate the idea that arts education is intrinsically useless knowledge, propounded by the general disrespect shown to the arts by some principals and non-arts teachers as testified by the learners themselves. A suggestion for further study is an investigation of the impact of school arts education on post-matric students in the working force in terms of cultural and artistic production or participation in society.

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